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SUBJECT: Iceland: Visit of USS Wasp Demonstrates "Robust and Visible" U.S. Commitment to Iceland's Defense

Refs: A) Reykjavik 369 (NOTAL)
B) Reykjavik 364 (NOTAL)
C) Reykjavik 359 (NOTAL)
D) Reykjavik 357 (NOTAL)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The October 12-17 port visit of the USS Wasp provided a visible demonstration of USG intent to honor its defense commitment to Iceland following the September closure of Naval Air Station Keflavik (NASKEF). The Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, and Justice Minister - just back from the Washington signing of a new Joint Understanding on future security arrangements - praised the timeliness and substance of the visit, and host government engagement was enthusiastic and professional.

¶2. (SBU) Local media coverage highlighted the Wasp's humanitarian relief capabilities and provided striking coverage of joint training by the Wasp's helicopter detachment and Icelandic Police and Coast Guard. The press also ran human interest stories on the lives of sailors and on Wasp's community outreach projects. The public welcomed sailors warmly, and there were no reports of liberty incidents. The visit undercut local skepticism over U.S. intent and capability to uphold its defense commitment, while strengthening Icelandic security forces and interagency planning - as well each side's familiarity with the other's procedures - in preparation for future exercises and contingencies. End summary.

¶3. (U) The USS Wasp (LHD-1), with an embarked crew of roughly 1300 sailors, visited Reykjavik October 12-17, arriving twelve days after the closure of Naval Air Station Keflavik (NASKEF) and one day after Secretary Rice joined Icelandic Prime Minister Haarde and Foreign

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Minister Sverrisdottir in signing a "Joint Understanding" on modernizing U.S.-Iceland defense and security relations.

¶4. (U) With support from USDAO Oslo and NAVEUR and an enthusiastic host government, Embassy and USS Wasp - the first U.S. warship to visit Iceland since 2002 - arranged for heavy media and political outreach in connection with the event, including:

-- a media embark by MH-53 helicopter to cover the vessel's arrival, which became a lead story in all major media ("The Yankees Are Back!");

-- ship tours and a reception for GOI officials and targeted groups (with a focus on students and rising political leaders) emphasizing the LHD's secondary role in humanitarian relief operations;

-- community relations projects (visits to the children's wing of

the national hospital and a home for the elderly by sailors and the 6th Fleet Jazz Ensemble, respectively, and sports matches with local notables); and

-- a joint Icelandic National Police "Viking Squad"/Icelandic Coast Guard (ICG) counterterrorism training event supported by the Wasp's helicopter detachment. The most memorable TV image was of Icelandic Police special forces and Coast Guard EOD specialists coming off an MH-53 to assault a suspected terrorist hideout. (Several Icelanders have commented to embassy officers that they never knew their police had this capability.)

15. (U) Media coverage was quite positive overall, with print media offering extensive photo spreads and broadcast media enjoying the opportunity for compelling video. The media offered no editorial reservations to counter the U.S. message that the visit demonstrated the sincerity and robustness of American commitment to Iceland's defense. (Post is sending media summaries and video files to Wasp and NAVEUR via email.)

16. (SBU) PM Geir Haarde, Foreign Minister Valgerdur Sverrisdottir, and Justice Minister Bjorn Bjarnason all toured the Wasp and expressed enthusiasm for the visit and for the briefings they received on the Wasp's amphibious assault and humanitarian assistance capabilities. In public comments, the PM and FM made an explicit link between the Joint Understanding and the ship visit, noting that the multi-role Wasp and her crew exemplified the mobile, flexible over-the-horizon forces that the U.S. had said could defend Iceland in a crisis.

17. (SBU) Officials from the Defense Department of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the ICG, and other agencies noted their appreciation to embassy officers, with one GOI official commenting that the visit made it easier for him to be "taken seriously" when he argued the benefits of U.S.-Iceland security cooperation.

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18. (SBU) Opposition parties largely ignored the visit. The youth wing of the Left-Green party, which has a stated policy of pacifism, declined a tour invitation and instead issued a public statement decrying the visit. They were echoed by the Alliance of Military Base Opponents, which castigated the Wasp's counterterrorism training with the Icelandic Police and ICG as contributing to the "militarization" of the security forces. The only public demonstration came in the form of four protestors who stood gamely in the rain pierside for an hour on 15 October, leaving as soon as their TV interviews were done.

19. (U) The public welcomed sailors warmly and there were no reports of liberty incidents. The only sour note: even with tour, store, and restaurant discounts arranged by the Embassy and local authorities, Iceland is an expensive liberty port. At Ambassador's direction, post is already engaging with Icelandic authorities to explore means of making the next ship visit easier on sailors' wallets.

110. (SBU) Comment: In the wake of the NASKEF closure decision, the leading opposition party and some press commentators (including some who had supported the presence of NASKEF) spoke of abrogating the 1951 U.S.-Iceland Defense Agreement, questioning American intent and capability to come to the defense of Iceland in a crisis. The Wasp's visit undercut those skeptics and confounded anti-NATO elements who had seen the NASKEF closure as a step on the road to Icelandic withdrawal from the Alliance.

111. (SBU) The visit also strengthened the Navy's familiarity with Icelandic security forces in preparation for future exercises and contingencies. The Police and Coast Guard took good advantage of both the real-world force protection requirements of the visit and the counterterrorism training to develop and demonstrate their own capabilities. The visit also provided useful experience for the Defense Department (note: a division of the Foreign Ministry, Iceland having no Defense Ministry), Coast Guard, Police, and Ministry of Justice in staff work and coordination (with one another and with the Embassy and Wasp). End comment.

¶12. (U) Post offers sincere thanks to USEUCOM, COMNAVEUR, Sixth Fleet, and "Team Wasp" for their outstanding support of USG goals vis-a-vis this NATO ally. We would warmly welcome another ship visit in 2007. Wasp has not cleared this message.

VAN VOORST